

125

In the Heart of the New South

LETTER FROM BIRMINGHAM, ALA.

BY

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It is not always necessary for a Gothamite to cross the wide ocean in order to "see sights" combining the elements of novelty, interest, and entertainment. New York is so well known to possess many of the features of European towns that she is often sneeringly referred to as the most un-American city in the United States. The metropolis may, indeed, be likened to a tangled web of many-colored skeins, not all silk either. For small pains you can find in her vast cosmopolitan make-up representatives of every known continent, besides that scattering minority which hails from nowhere in particular. This mince-pie heterogeneousness of our city is clearly reflected in her medical life. We have Chinese physicians among us. (One of them died the other day, in the prime of life. An Irish widow and two children, one black, the other yellowish, survive him.) Turkish doctors are in our midst and out of it. We lack not the classic Greek, the emetic Tartar, the high-cheeked Scandinavian, and his modest friend from Gaul. With us African medical men are no rarity—and what is more, they manage to speak the vernacular far more intelligibly than our over-abundant British, Irish, German, and Italian importations. Like crude sugar, these medical raw materials are on the free list of the McKinley bill. And like crude sugar, you might not care to have them with your tea, before passing them through a native refinery.

But, all the same, New York is America, even profes-

sionally speaking, though possibly not yet to the same extent that Paris is France.

The New South.—But the “New South,” of which we have all heard so much lately, the “Great South,” which in neuropathic boom-paroxysms has already out-wested the West—that surely is American—core, backbone, marrow, and all.

Well, sir, the American place where I have my American washing “done up,” down here, on the American plan, is presided over by a grinning Celestial, whose aide-de-wash is a buxom black lassie, whose right bower is an Irishman from Indiany, bedad. And this giddy triumvirate is skilfully aided and abetted by a one-eyed Italian with an unadulterated squaw for helpmate. For downright unmitigated Americanism, this quintuple alliance of the clothes-line deserves the ginger-snap every time; and probably gets it, too. For whenever I put on anything that has been in that Birmingham, Ala., New South laundry, something snaps, and a low, mellow voice may be heard to softly murmur, “Ginger!” This may seem fancy, but it is a fact, sir, a melancholy fact. As for the polyglotism involved in getting the dirt on your collar and pair of cuffs glossed over, it would be bewildering to any ordinary linguist. But a RECORD man doesn’t shy at anything short of a night-call at the free-lunch counter.

It is a few weeks ago that, in response to an urgent professional summons from a New York family, I hurriedly packed my medical grip-sack and started southward for Birmingham. It will be my privilege to reproduce for your readers a few of the impressions made there on the camera (*lucida?*) of my sensory apparatus. The instantaneous process is now so much in vogue that I have no hesitation in claiming considerable truthfulness for my pen-pictures.

Birmingham.—What I will have to say, however, may not apply to the entire section below Mason and Dixon’s line known as the New South, but it certainly refers to the Birmingham region, where I have spent most of my time. It soon forces itself upon the attention of the

stranger here that the people have no mean opinion of their place and of themselves. In the aggressive enterprise of the "boom which has come to stay," Birmingham, the Magic City, reminds a Northerner far more of the eager bustle of a Western town, than of the languid indolence of the typical South, especially as depicted in modern works of fiction. There may be a simple reason for all this. The real Southerner is apparently not in the ascendant here. Of course there is no dearth of "Colonels" and "Majors," and high and low employ the pleasing "Howdy," in place of our more prolix Northern form of salutation. But nevertheless the outsiders, the *immigrés*, the new arrivals, *i.e.*, the pioneer class, preponderate by large odds over the old native element.

A recent issue of the leading Birmingham paper, *The Age-Herald* (presumably so called on account of its youthful New York namesake), serenely informs the Birminghamites and their suburban friends, the rest of the world, that "Birmingham is the central city of all the South. Kentucky and Florida, Virginia and Texas, can come together here as at no other point. It is, by right of location and railroad facilities, the common meeting-ground of *twelve States*. Everybody wants to come to Birmingham. All the religious bodies, all the secret societies, all the railroad people want to meet here, and want to meet so badly that they come in spite of the halls we haven't got."

The engaging modesty of this touching sentiment finds echo in the daily utterance of all the nomad residents here. There are no real residents, in the Northern sense. All come and go by the month, the week, or the day, occasionally even by the year.

The Race-Problem Solved.—Nobody ever visits the South without forthwith solving the race-problem. How the hydra-headed monster manages to retain even mediocre vitality in face of its persistent solution, especially by Northern transients, will have to occupy the serious attention of future historians. Of course your correspondent, following imperative footprints, has also solved this

ever-present problem. Here is his solution, and may Heaven forgive him if the smack of frivolousness should stand in the way of its immediate adoption: "Trade the nigger off for a yellow pup. Take the pup to the edge of the world. Drop him. And then see to it that he stays dropped." *Probatum est.*

There can be no valid objection to this rather radical method. For, have we not told the Chinaman that he must stay at home? Have we not cheated the only true American, the Indian, out of his birthright, and spurned his piteous appeals for more humane treatment? Then why this apotheosis of the African? He is more alien to the Caucasian than the Malay or the Red Man. Let him return to his native soil and clime, yes, let him climb.

The Practice of Medicine in the South.—Having thus disposed of the most perplexing problem of modern times, we can now profitably turn to the practice of medicine in the South. This appears to me very like the same occupation at home. If there are no far-famed leaders of the profession in Birmingham, they nevertheless have men who are called in consultation, and those who never do more than the calling. So, too, do they have big doctors and little doctors; those who are ever haunted by the dreadful secret of their own pre-eminence, as well as that subfamily of "Docs" who are not yet as macrocephalic as they will be a little later on, especially in the estimation of themselves; those who belong to the common, every-day, plenty-good-enough-for-me variety of practitioner, who sometimes hits an ail on the head, and more sometimes doesn't. They have doctors with horses and conveyances, and those without any awe-inspiring appurtenances. They have freshly hatched specialists, with bits of vitelline membrane and shell still fondly clinging to their puny persons, tell-taling the hoary ripeness of their experience. Besides these modern abortions they have the truly venerable humbugs, the fashionable quacks, the "orfully busy" general practitioners, and those vagrants who modestly advertise as "lately of the

Polyclinic." They have the statuesque frowners and the lubricated smilers, the man who is *suaviter* in his *modo* dealing with all womankind, and proportionately *fortiter* in regard to the size of his bills. They have the doctor who never speaks at the medical society, and was never known to publish anything at all, and his friend across the way who always speaks, and always says what has been already better said, and who was never known to leave anything unpublished, especially the cases he thinks he has seen, and those matters which he believes he knows.

"Mein Liebchen, was willst du noch mehr?"

The only *avis medicalis* I have not yet run across down here is the top lofty potentate-professor. But though professors come low nowadays, we must have them. It is a matter of time merely, when they will erupt in this torrid zone, and then the mushroom will kindly step to the rear, and a little lively, too, please. Won't he, though?

In other words, they have just about what we have, only a trifle more so, because their medical laws are so strict; and perhaps, also, owing to the absence of a partisan board of health, there being only one party in the South.

Plenty of Doctors in Birmingham.—There is certainly no lack of doctors in Birmingham and its suburbs. In an over-estimated population of 45,000, they count at least one hundred and twenty-five men who expect to get a living out of medicine. And I am credibly informed that quite a formidable proportion of this professional light brigade, with counter-prescribing druggists to right of them, in front of them, etc., never get much beyond the expectant stage of earning their bread and butter.

Now, it is not a bad plan, in my opinion, to let some of our myriad "college-fodder" doctors stew in their own expectations. When they have stewed long enough to be thoroughly well-done, their children will probably choose a less over-populated calling, and one that requires more of an outlay in money, brains, and time than medical

"diploma-getting" does nowadays. To borrow a suggestion from practical politics, my motto would be: "Turn the professors out," and "let the doctors in." So long as the "Dr. with a diploma" is such a cheap and plentiful commodity, the "Dr. without a diploma" will remain at his present premium. That ought to make good smoking for some people's pipes. And not a few pipes either, nor yet ten leagues away from home.

One thing is certain, the doctors don't go to Birmingham for their health. They go there for the boom which was, and, in a measure, still is. They go there because they have heard that all the New South doctors are on them ache. Nevertheless, after a due consideration of present chances and prospects, my advice to the young physician about to locate in Birmingham, is identical with *Punch's* counsel to the man about to marry, viz., Don't.

An Undue Proportion of Cripples.—It struck me, however, that there was an undue proportion of cripples, chiefly colored, round about this neighborhood, and doubtless the right kind of an aseptic surgeon could reap a rich harvest here. A few successful extensions, subtractions, infractions (in osseous, not legal parlance), and similarly mysterious doings, that constitute the black art of modern much-mixed orthopædology, would soon establish a medical man's fame on so firm a footing that his pocket-book would speedily cease limping after his money-spending desires. Sounds quite millennial, does it not, from a physician's point of view? According to the well-known adage, it's the early splint that captures the pocket-book.

Common Types of Men and Women.—It is unavoidable, of course, that I should say a few words about common types of men and women. The advent of Bar-num (who had not visited this section of the South for over fifteen years) thronged Birmingham with the entire walkable and transportable population of a radius of at least fifty miles. The way some of them came would surely have suggested novel pictures to the artists of our comic journals. Yet these vast crowds of intermingling

blacks and whites, though easily inclined to boisterous hilarity, rough pleasantries, and as the day waned, waxing more and more bibulous (as we are all apt to wax), were at least as well behaved as any metropolitan crowd, under similar provocation. The circus afforded me an excellent opportunity to observe fair specimens of rural and city mankind, as well as woman-and-child-kind.

As regards the men, they looked pretty much like men do all over this country, when wholly engaged in the single-minded pursuit of every money-making advantage. I can dismiss the men without further comment than the now firmly settled conviction, that the ubiquitous "May-jaw" and "Coynal" really are—ubiquitous.

As for the women. May God forgive me if I pronounce a slander upon the fair sex. But the women here don't "look right." I have read recently, and I believe it, that "native beauty as developed in America is the outgrowth of such heterogeneous elements, such a conglomeration of nationalities, the interfusion of so many races and types, that any attempt to classify or even account for it, save as American, is futile. It is undeniable that climatic influences, freedom from old-world measures of restraint, and the diversity of our scenery, are forces which have contrived, unconsciously but effectively, to produce indigenous types."

Well, the indigenous type here is peculiar to the verge of the pathological. The women are almost all thin, haggard of feature, anxious, and apparently careworn in countenance. At twenty-five they look more wrinkled, sallow, and worn than they do home at forty. Many of them positively seem cachectic. You could readily fancy having found a colony where mammary carcinoma had become epidemic, and where wholesale amputation of the female breasts had become a matter of public safety, without, however, having successfully stamped out the dreadful visitation or eliminated the prevailing cachexia.

A large proportion of the babies and children also look more like the puny, under-fed products of our reeking tenements, than the plump denizens of a healthful pro-

vincial town. I understand that the servant question is held responsible for some of this mischief. Wet-nurses are hard to obtain. The mothers are willing enough, but generally find themselves in much the same fix that confronted the cherubim, when politely asked by St. Cecilia to be seated. They said: "*Avec plaisir, madame, mais nous n'avons pas de quoi.*"

The Gallinipper.—From humanity we get by an easy gradation to the gallinipper, who is a much maligned and greatly overrated institution of the New South. It is true, he is big, black, and burly. He comes early and often, and he stays late, just like the front-parlor young man, when getting engaged. At first sight you are inclined to enter into diplomatic negotiations with him, to treat his liberal advances with distinguished consideration. But on better acquaintance you learn to cut him dead, and cut him quick. There is no Wagner in him, only the timid tinkle of Italian opera. He has no vim. A tired rattlesnake might hold more poison. Alongside of a fairly healthy Jersey mosquito (and there are such), or even a South-Side Long Islander, just out of his teens, he is a pale figment of fiction, an Eden Musée imitation, a thing to be laughed at and treated with scorn, or gentlest slaps at most. For a real tap would spoil him quicker than a keg of lager on a close election. In the prime of his manhood the gallinipper is as weak as circus-lemonade. When he has done his level worst you feel tempted to exclaim: "Oh, galli, where is thy sting! Oh, nipper, where is thy misery." Gentlemen of the South, if you *must* know what a well-bred family of mosquitoes can do, take a Long Branch dude with his bold aquiline profile in *haut relief*. Take him after a mild evening stroll on what was formerly a beach. Take him, and inspect him, and if you like, keep him, though the chances are you won't want to long. But as for bites—the most exacting artist could easily utilize him for a study in wheal-life.

Sapienti sat. And so will I.

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